WORLD CHRONICLE

UNITED NATIONS

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PROGRAMME: **"WORLD CHRONICLE"**

GUEST: Samir Shihabi, President of the 46th General Assembly of the United Nations

JOURNALISTS: Raghida Dergham, Al-Hayat, London
Ian Williams, The Scotsman
Marian Houk, Christian Science Monitor

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SYNOPSIS

GA PRESIDENT

Samir Shihabi, President of the 46th United Nations General Assembly, expresses his personal views on a number of global issues. The end of the Cold War, Mr. Shihabi says, has changed the climate for better international relations.

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VOICE: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

The United Nations General Assembly is one of the principal legislative organs of the world organization. Every year, in September, the General Assembly opens a regular session. World leaders converge on United Nations Headquarters in New York, stating their positions on international, regional and national issues. This year, the Assembly meets as the world enters a new era of international co-operation in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War.

Our guest today, Mr. Samir Shihabi, is the President of the current 46th General Assembly. A national of Saudi Arabia, Mr. Shihabi has served as his country's Permanent Representative to the United Nations since 1983.

He will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Raghida Dergham of Al-Hayat of London; Ian Williams of The Scotsman and; Marian Houk of the Christian Science Monitor.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. President, as we've just noted, the world has gone through some extraordinary changes in the past year. What sort of impact are these changes going to have, for better or worse, hopefully for better, on the United Nations and specifically the General Assembly?

SHIHABI: They already have, and they will have a great impact on the conduct of affairs in the General Assembly, no doubt. We

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have seen that very clearly in the general tone of the statements given by heads of state, heads of government and foreign ministers and Chairmen of delegations during the last seventeen days of the general debate and I would say there was almost a consensus on the new attitude to international relations which made me very happy and I'm sure, which gave satisfaction to the whole Assembly.

LITTLEJOHNS: Would you say that the level of political dialogue has improved as a result of the changes?

SHIHABI: Not only the level, but the quality of the political dialogue has improved. It really reflected the improvement in the international arena.

LITTLEJOHNS: Less confrontation?

SHIHABI: I would say, you could hardly feel the confrontation in the sense of the Cold War confrontation. You could always find differences of opinion; of course, there are still very critical issues on the agenda, there are important differences on many of these issues but I would say that the trend, the attitude on some of these issues, is not the Cold War attitude. There is more an interest really in seeing that justice is done in every way.

DERGHAM: Speaking of new attitudes, Mr. President, it was obvious that Saudi Arabia, before your election, had maintained a low profile at the United Nations. Then your election came about to probably move that impression away and replaced it with a high-profile Saudi Arabia. Was this due to the Gulf War and the world's participation in that war or was there always this assertiveness that you did not come up with it up front before last year - before your election, that is?

SHIHABI: As a matter of fact, this discussion has been going

on in the chanceries in Saudi Arabia before the Gulf War about having a normal profile in the United Nations in particular and of course, I presume that this will entail a normal profile everywhere in the international arena, in the international organizations. Of course, I consider this a right for Saudi Arabia and a duty of Saudi Arabia to have a normal profile in the United Nations and it was the wise judgement of the leadership of Saudi Arabia to go for a normal profile.

DERGHAM: You say normal profile, of course, I don't know what is normal now in your terms but what had happened before your election was that never anyone from Saudi Arabia had run for any post in the United Nations and suddenly, there was a very strong campaign and it **did** happen after the Gulf War. Are you saying that this was considered - all the plans, all the decisions were made way before the Gulf War or do you disassociate your interest, Saudi Arabia's new interest in world affairs, from what had happened in the Gulf War?

SHIHABI: No, the issue was under consideration before the Gulf War. Probably the Gulf War delayed the decision. Of course, the decision came after the Gulf War due to that.

WILLIAMS: Mr. President, you are President of the General Assembly at a time when one of the crucial issues in the world is the impending promised Middle East peace conference and of course, you are born in Palestine yourself so I expect you have a direct, personal interest in how this proceeds. Do you agree with many statements from the United Nations personnel that the UN has not been allotted a high enough role in the forthcoming Middle East peace negotiations?

SHIHABI: Well, you know, any Arab would have a great interest in the question of Palestine, born in Palestine or otherwise and as

an Arab and a Saudi Arabian, I certainly have great interest. Having been born in Palestine, of course, that makes the interest as strong. I consider it, as the President of the General Assembly, very important for the United Nations to play its role because any solution would have to be based on United Nations resolutions and any attempt to sidetrack the United Nations could really be misinterpreted and would not give the right image, be the right approach, in my view.

WILLIAMS: As President of the General Assembly, is there any way that you can assert the General Assembly's role in the forthcoming negotiations?

SHIHABI: We'll see. We still have time ahead of us, we've not yet come to Middle East issue in the General Assembly. When we come to the Middle East issue and to the Palestine issue, we'll see what will happen in the General Assembly. I won't like to take positions before the General Assembly takes a position.

HOUK: Sir, by the time it comes up in the General Assembly, it is hoped that the Conference will already have started. Do you see the shape of the Conference evolving and some part of it perhaps coming back to the UN?

SHIHABI: Certainly, the efforts that are going on will have an influence on what goes on in the General Assembly and I hope vice versa and whether it will start by that time or not, let us wait and see but the General Assembly, I hope, will have a role in that. Let me put it more generally, the United Nations, I hope will have a role. If it is the Secretary-General, Security Council or the other bodies of the UN - they are all part of the overall General Assembly responsibility actually.

HOUK: A number of Arab ambassadors that I've interviewed

at the beginning of the General Assembly have suggested that the issue of the "Zionism is Racism" resolution which the American delegation is determined to raise in the General Assembly which President Bush did raise in his speech could be something on the table if the Conference starts. Do you think that something along those lines might happen in this Assembly?

SHIHABI: This a controversial issue and I would prefer not to comment on controversial issues before they come to the table in the General Assembly.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are you suggesting when you say it's a controversial issue, Mr. President, are you suggesting that perhaps the idea of repealing this resolution of 1975 - that Zionism and racism amount to the same thing - is not going to be an easy thing for the United States to accomplish or the countries that want it repealed, to accomplish?

SHIHABI: This is why I said I would rather not comment on it at this stage before it comes to the floor of the General Assembly.

DERGHAM: Is it coming to the floor during this Assembly?

SHIHABI: I said **if** it comes to the floor.

DERGHAM: So there is a possibility it might not be officially...

SHIHABI: I couldn't speak for the delegations, you know. If a delegation decides to bring it, then it will come. If they decide otherwise, then it will not come.

DERGHAM: I'd like to take you back to the issue of the Conference supposedly to be held outside the United Nations. The

Secretary-General was rather critical of excluding the UN or reducing its role to simply an observer, he said. The European Community is probably trying to have an observer status but not the United Nations which had played a role in creating the state of Israel. Would you be as critical for excluding the United Nations or do you have any ideas or any thoughts or any information that the UN's role is going to be larger than the one prescribed so far?

SHIHABI: I certainly support the position taken by the Secretary-General. I think he has taken a correct position in that.

WILLIAMS: One of the things which the staff of the United Nations continually raise is that the UN civil servants at the sort of sharp edge of peace-keeping operations and even normal operations, sometimes suffer from ill-treatment by the governments that they go to serve. I think there have been 700 hundred peacekeeping troops killed; there's something like over a hundred UN civilian civil servants who've been imprisoned or in various ways mistreated by governments. Do you think as President of the General Assembly which includes some of the governments doing this, that you have a role in looking after the welfare of the people who the world entrusts with these operations?

SHIHABI: Most certainly, and I will go all out for looking after their welfare. No doubt about it.

WILLIAMS: Is there any way you can intervene with some of the governments directly involved to persuade them to respect the badges and the privileges of UN civil servants?

SHIHABI: If the situation requires that, I'll certainly do it.

HOUK: The issue of the Gulf War was raised earlier in this interview and I would like to go back to that and ask you about the position of Iraq but it is clear that its sovereignty has been reduced by decisions of the Security Council but it's not clear by how much. On the other hand, it still has a seat in the General Assembly for example, and I noticed that the Iraqi Foreign Ministry congratulated you on your elections but Iraq is testing the limits of whatever sovereignty is left to it and trying to preserve what it can. I think that the experience of the UN inspection teams, the disarmament teams in Iraq is an example of that. How do you see the situation as President of the Assembly on Iraq's sovereignty here in the UN?

SHIHABI: As President of the Assembly of course, I am governed by the resolutions taken by the Security Council and the General Assembly on this issue and the problems started when Iraq violated the sovereignty of another member state, Kuwait. And the measures that were taken were mainly intended to regain the sovereignty of the other member state and the measures that are taken now are meant to ensure that this would not be repeated again. Of course, the details would be the responsibility of the Security Council and the Secretary-General has been asked to oversee the operations there.

DERGHAM: This issue of sovereignty is supposedly a very paramount issue for the United Nations. Now, when five - or four rather - Israeli fighter planes go through five Arab skies and the United States protests to Israel for having violated the sovereignty of these five Arab states and the United Nations is absolutely silent, the Security Council was silent, you as the President of the General Assembly were silent. Are you lot undermining the issue of sovereignty that has been the backbone of this organization?

SHIHABI: Nobody approves or accepts the violation of sovereignty of neighbouring states or of any another state. Actually, you'll always find in the attitude of member governments here, their very strong commitment and jealousy about sovereignty. So nobody should be accused of being silent if the occasion hasn't come to speak or we haven't been asked the question on the subject. Nobody approves of violation of sovereignty and I'm sure if the issue is raised, you'll find that there will be a reaction in the General Assembly.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE.** Our guest is Mr. Samir Shihabi, President of the 46th General Assembly of the United Nations.

DERGHAM: I'd like to follow up. The United States again made it clear to the Israelis that going over the Iraqi territory jeopardizes even the lives and the missions of the UN inspection teams. Do you feel the same way and would you call on the Israelis to halt such actions because, at least, of what it implies of threat to UN inspectors?

SHIHABI: Actually, the only acts that would be allowed on the Iraqi territory by a non-Iraqi presence, are the acts that have been authorized by the Security Council. Any other act or violation would certainly be rejected by the United Nations.

HOUK: I'd like to get back to the question actually. Do you view Iraq's sovereignty as being affected at all? And secondly, do you see the question of sanctions coming before the General Assembly?

SHIHABI: Let me go to the last question before the first. So far, I haven't seen any indication of the question of sanctions coming before the General Assembly. Of course you know the item is

on the agenda, the item of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Still, it hasn't been taken off the agenda. But other things will really be the domain of the Security Council.

HOUK: And the question of sovereignty, do you see it as limited in any way or affected by the decisions of the Council?

SHIHABI: Basically, the sovereignty of any country - the UN should be the custodian of the sovereignty of every country, of every member state, Iraq included. But there are temporary measures to be taken for the sake of preservation of peace. I wouldn't look at it as a violation of the sovereignty, being within the limits of the resolutions of the Security Council but of course, we should know those limits and how long it will continue.

WILLIAMS: During last year's conflict in the Gulf, there was a considerable feeling even from people who supported most of what the Security Council was doing. The Security Council in many ways was taking far more power at the expense of the General Assembly. Several people suggested that if there had been a debate of the issues in the General Assembly, it might have been brought to a more peaceful and speedy resolution than had it been steered by the Security Council and the five permament members. As President of the General Assembly, do you feel in any way you have a role in attempting to reassert the authority of the 167 member states as against the five permament members.

LITTLEJOHNS: 166, I believe.

WILLIAMS: I keep losing count, it goes up so often nowadays.

SHIHABI: I think people should go back to the Charter of the United Nations, in which the Security Council was created to take care of the preservation of peace, the maintenance of peace so

within the measures taken by the Security Council for maintenance of peace, the Security Council has acted within its own mandate and there is no indication that this would infringe on the overall mandate of the General Assembly where the 166 members are permanent members and where any issue can be discussed and any issue can be taken a position on, of course provided each must have this proviso. We don't normally discuss an issue that is under consideration in the Security Council for the purpose of not undermining the work of the Security Council because maintenance of peace is paramount in the Charter of the UN. That's why it can't be looked at as being an infringement on the General Assembly because the General Assembly is the body of the whole world.

WILLIAMS: The events in eastern Europe have completely wiped away the 1945 post-war dispensation agreed at Yalta with one exception - the five victors who met at Yalta, the five permament powers, America, the Soviet Union, China, France and Britain, are still more sovereign than others within the United Nations system. Do you think that this last vestige of the post-war dispensation can survive much longer?

SHIHABI: The change in the international climate has brought about a consideration of every aspect of the international situation today. But basically, the basic rules of the game as they were established by the Charter in 1945, we are still with them until today. Whether there will be any slight alterations, slight change, an adjustment in the future, I can't tell now. Of course, there are many people who ask this question the way you asked it. Whether asking questions could result in discussion on the issue, let us wait and see.

LITTLEJOHNS: But in fact, Mr. President, the changes that Ian Williams speaks about - possible changes - require an amendment of the UN Charter and the five permanent members have the right of

veto there. So in fact, changes are rather unlikely, are they not?

SHIHABI: Yes, but we should understand one thing very important. These five permament members are very wise people, they are not irresponsible, they are very responsible people.

LITTLEJOHNS: But they are also very jealous of their power.

SHIHABI: If they find that the international climate requires a certain adjustment, I'm sure they will not set themselves out to be against it. But you see, this is a long process. It doesn't come overnight, you see. Any change in the world arena starts normally with questions, then with discussions, then you'll find public opinion building up for it, then the change would be almost a middle-of-the-road solution between these considerations so should any change come, it would be really the result of agreement between everybody.

DERGHAM: In the past there was a time that it was considered that the General Assembly was being run by what was called then a Third World automatic majority that was later on meant to be reversed by Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick. Now what we see is - really following my colleague's point - that is the five permanent members of the Security Council running the show of the United Nations. In general, in fact it's being called the United Nations of the United States. Do you feel that this has reversed anything the Third World countries have done or do you think it is legitimate since the United States is the leader, the only super-power, at least for the time being, in the world?

SHIHABI: I would consider that a misrepresentation of the actual functioning of the United Nations. Probably people are impressed of course by the role played by one or more power or group of powers during the Gulf War which is natural and we

shouldn't forget that the positions taken in the Security Council were tne consensus of many, many countries and without that consensus, these resolutions would not have taken place. That was a strong public opinion in the United Nations in favour of these resolutions and you know that the coalition was composed of 7 to 8 countries who strongly stood for that. Some countries had a more effective role than others in this, depending on many factors but I wouldn't say that the balance in the UN has been changed. Not at all.

DERGHAM: But the United States has been much more active. It is for the first time in fact that we see it in fifteen years so active on an issue. Is this a sign of a new direction for the United Nations? It might be a healthy one. I'm not saying it's negative or positive but it is absolutely true that the United States has pursued a different course. How do you expect it to impact on the United Nations?

SHIHABI: But you should remember it was in coalition with a very big number of Third World countries and that the support that these resolutions got from the non-aligned group in the Security Council was vital, was **as** decisive really. The lead taken by the United States in that was naturally strong and visible.

WILLIAMS: On a personal note, I'd have always thought that the President of the General Assembly was a contender for one of the most boring jobs in the world, sitting there listening to people endlessly droning official lines, but this year I detected almost a touch of idiosyncrasy as people, without the constraints of ideology, were ventilating some quite novel ideas. Even very small states were producing good ideas on environment - I think the Prince of Liechtenstein spoke at some length on the self-determination for minorities in a very interesting speech. Has it been boring for you or has this year been more stimulating than

usual?

SHIHABI: It has been very interesting for me, very interesting.

LITTLEJOHNS: That's all you've got to say, that it's just been interesting?

SHIHABI: Yes, to me, when I listen to a speech and more recently, when I listen to the speech, I think of the overall Assembly in front of me and that's why probably I would have a different feeling about it than somebody else who is just sitting on a seat and listening to a speech.

LITTLEJOHNS: In your mind, do you make a kind of judgement? Do you say to yourself, "This guy is talking a lot of nonsense" and "This guy is making sense"? Does that happen?

SHIHABI: Of course, always when you listen to something, you judge it after what you think is a certain standard but as the President of the General Assembly, when you listen to all these speeches, you try to understand the trend not of one speech but the whole trend of speeches. That's my main thing.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Shihabi, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**. Our guest has been Mr. Samir Shihabi, President of the 46th General Assembly of the United Nations.

He was interviewed here at United Nations headquarters in New York by: Raghida Dergham of Al-Hayat of London; Ian Williams of The Scotsman and; Marian Houk of the Christian Science Monitor.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

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